

## **Julia Lathrop-Shorter**

Leah Malkovich

University Laboratory High School, Urbana

Teacher: Adele Suslick

Julia Lathrop used compassion to improve the life of poor children in Illinois. She was one of the first to serve at Hull House in Chicago and worked tirelessly on behalf of mothers, their children, the mentally ill, and juvenile delinquents.

Julia Lathrop's family, both extended and immediate, taught her to assist those less fortunate than herself. She was a descendent of Reverend John Lothrop, who immigrated to America in 1634. Both sets of her grandparents were pioneers in the Abolitionist movement in Illinois and were also some of the earliest settlers of Rockford, Illinois. Julia Lathrop's parents were politically active in Rockford society. Her father, William Lathrop, was an attorney and a friend of President Lincoln's as well as a member of the Illinois legislature. He served in Congress from 1877 until 1879, and he helped draft the first bill allowing women to practice law. Julia Lathrop drew upon the activist legacy of her family in order to promote her own social work in Illinois.

Julia was born on June 29, 1858, the eldest of five children. Her parents believed that women should have the same opportunities as men; consequently, they never let Julia or her sister feel disadvantaged because they were girls. In fact, they encouraged Lathrop from a young age to engage in whatever activities or studies interested her even if they were primarily "boyish" studies. Her parents valued education and made sure she completed both high school and college. They wanted her to succeed at life and enjoy herself. Her father's love of politics and his will to change the way things were run

throughout the state and nation deeply affected Julia. He passed on to her his wish to reform civil service.

Julia graduated from Rockford High School in 1876. She attended the Rockford Seminary for one year and, in her own words, transferred to a “real women’s college” in 1877. The college she chose was Vassar College. She graduated in 1880, after studying statistics, institutional history, sociology, and community organization. After graduation, she returned to Rockford and worked in her father’s law office. During the years between 1880 and 1890, she also studied law with guidance from her father.

Lathrop decided that she wanted more out of life; therefore, she went to work for Hull House in Chicago in 1890. Hull House was a settlement home for the needy in a notoriously poor part of Chicago. The more famous Jane Addams, with the help of Lathrop, started Hull House in the home of Charles J. Hull.

In 1892, two years after Lathrop joined Hull House, the Governor of Illinois appointed her to the State Board of Charities. Lathrop assumed this position in June 1893. She received this position in recognition of her extensive knowledge about residents’ living conditions. Her study exposed how much poverty there was in the area around Hull House. Consequently, she wrote *The Hull-House Maps and Papers*, a book about Hull House and the area surrounding it, and she published it in 1895. Lathrop also visited all 102 of the poorhouses in Illinois.

In 1899, Julia Lathrop established the first juvenile court in the United States for individuals under sixteen years of age. The juvenile court founded by Lathrop was the model for new social welfare programs that encouraged probation instead of incarceration. Juvenile courts completely changed how neglected, dependent, and

delinquent children were tried in a court of law. Juvenile courts treated minors not as adults, but as children and took the child's living situation into consideration.

Julia continued to serve the poor, when in 1918, she became the second woman president of the National Conference of Social Work, following in Jane Addams's footsteps. In 1921, she was appointed by President Taft as the first head of the U. S. Children's Bureau. As head of the bureau, she organized a study of infant mortality and found that unsanitary conditions, lack of health care, and extreme poverty were the main causes of infant death. With the results of this study, Lathrop launched an educational campaign that helped to decrease infant mortality.

During the last two years of Lathrop's life, she fought to create a law against the execution of minors. Her inspiration was a seventeen year-old boy from Rockford named Russell McWilliams who stopped a streetcar and shot the motorman. After pleading guilty, he was scheduled to be electrocuted in December of 1931. Lathrop wrote a public letter against this decision and had several letters and petitions sent to the governor of Illinois. After a long and difficult process, McWilliams was given a 99-year sentence instead of death.

At the time of her death, Lathrop was in her hometown. No matter where she traveled, she always came back to Rockford, Illinois. When Lathrop died, several of the world's social welfare leaders took note of her death and called her a very humble and influential woman. She passed away on April 15, 1932 at the age of 73.

In conclusion, Julia Lathrop was an industrious woman who achieved much for those living in poverty. She helped change the way that juvenile delinquents and the mentally ill were treated and helped educate expectant mothers about prenatal care. She also helped create Hull House and was one of the first workers there. When Julia Lathrop died, those in need around Hull House and Illinois lost an important voice.

[From Edith Abbott, "Julia Clifford Lathrop." *Dictionary of American Biography*. 2008. *Biography Resource Center*. Gale. <<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itweb/?db=BioRC>>.

Aug. 24, 2008 ; Jane Addams, *My Friend, Julia Lathrop*; Amy Reynolds Alexander, "Reformer Julia Lathrop Attention to Detail Got Her Results." *Investor's Business Daily* Jan. 5, 2001. *LexisNexis Academic*. LexisNexis. University High School Library.

<<http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>>. Sept. 7, 2008; John Middlemist Herrick and Paul H. Stuart, "Lathrop, Julia Clifford." *Encyclopedia of Social Welfare History in North America*. 222-223. Google books <http://books.google.com/books?id=2t-f8dedRuUC&printsec=frontcover#PPA223,M1> (Sept. 18, 2008); "Hull House."

*Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2008.

<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/275272/Hull-House>>. Sept. 18, 2008;

"Hull House Jubilee." *Time* 19 May 1930. *Time Inc.* 2008.

<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,739282,00.html>>. (Sept. 18, 2008);

"Julia Lathrop." *Vassar Encyclopedia*. 14 Oct. 2007.

<[http://vcenclopedia.vassar.edu/index.php/Julia\\_Lathrop](http://vcenclopedia.vassar.edu/index.php/Julia_Lathrop)>. (Sept. 7, 2008); Laura

Schwartz, "Julia Lathrop 1858-1932." *Women & Health* Sept.-Oct. 1977: 2; and

David S. Tanenhaus, "Juvenile Courts." *Encyclopedia of Chicago*. 2005. Chicago History Museum. <<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/682.html>>. (Sept. 28, 2008).]